

Aiken, Francis Thomas ('Frank')

by Ronan Fanning

Aiken, Francis Thomas ('Frank') (1898–1983), farmer, revolutionary, and politician, was born 13 February 1898 in Carrickbracken, Camlough, Co. Armagh, seventh child and youngest son of James Aiken, farmer and builder from Co. Tyrone, and Mary Aiken (née McGeeney), of Corromannon, Belleek, Co. Armagh. James Aiken, a prominent nationalist who had built many of the catholic churches in south Armagh and had declined overtures to stand for parliament, was a member of the county council and the first nationalist chairman of the local board of guardians, where he had adjourned a resolution welcoming Queen Victoria on her visit to Dublin in 1900 'until Ireland became free'.

**Early life; war and politics** Frank was educated at the CBS, Newry. He began managing the family farm after his mother's death, when he was 13; although he left school at 16, he was a keen student of agricultural techniques and was elected chairman of the Co-operative Flax-Scutching Society at Camlough in 1917. A member of the Gaelic League and secretary of the local branch from 1914, he became a committed Irish-speaker after several visits to the Donegal Gaeltacht and attendance at Omeath Irish College; from then on he spoke and used the Irish language whenever he could. He was big for his age – 15 – when in 1913 he was elected lieutenant on joining the local company of the Irish Volunteers, which collapsed after the 1914 split.

Aiken played no part in the 1916 rising, but a lifelong association with Éamon de Valera (qv) began in July 1917 when he helped in the Clare by-election campaign. Charged with stewarding a rowdy meeting when he went to hear de Valera speak at Bessbrook during the Armagh South by-election in February 1918, he then organised the Camlough company of Volunteers and was elected captain. He was also active in Sinn Féin from 1917: as an officer of the Camlough club, as secretary of the South Armagh comhairle ceanntair, as constituency representative on the executive in Dublin, and as chief fund-raiser for the Dáil Éireann loan in south Armagh in 1919–20. But he owed his early eminence to military rather than political leadership. He became commandant of the Camlough company in 1919, vice-commandant of the Newry brigade in 1920, and commandant of the 4th Northern Division (comprising north Louth, south and west Down, parts of Tyrone and Antrim, and all Co. Armagh) from March 1921. On the run from autumn 1919 after British forces burned his family home as a reprisal, he frequently commanded his men in action, notably in the derailment near Newry of the troop train carrying the cavalry who had escorted the king at the opening of the Northern Ireland parliament in June 1921. Like Seán Mac Eoin (qv), he won grudging respect from his British adversaries as an honourable antagonist.

Aiken remained a full-time IRA officer after the truce of July 1921 and, when the dáil endorsed the treaty in January 1922, bent his energies to preventing civil war. Hence his opposition to the call for an army convention before the publication of a new constitution, on the grounds that “any fool might start a civil war” because there would then be two armies’; and he was the solitary senior IRA officer described as ‘non-partisan’ in a list published in March 1922 (Skinner, 157–8). Early in 1922 he headed the short-lived Ulster command, consisting of pro- and anti-treaty officers, which moved arms from the south to the IRA divisions in Northern Ireland. His efforts to avert civil war were also reflected in his key role in the negotiation of the Collins–de Valera pact in May 1922, in his urging Richard Mulcahy (qv) to declare a truce after the attack on the Four Courts (28–30 June), and in his acting as liaison officer in a short-lived local truce in Limerick. When these efforts failed he returned to his own IRA division, which had been responsible for a reprisal sectarian massacre of six innocent presbyterians in Altnaveigh, Co. Down, on 17 June 1922, and which he initially persuaded to remain neutral in the civil war. But the division’s refusal to support the provisional government led to the arrest and imprisonment of Aiken and 200 of his men in Dundalk jail. ‘Somebody wants to goad our division into resistance’, he wrote to Mulcahy (Hopkinson, 170), and on 28 July he led a mass escape of over a hundred prisoners. He then reorganised his command and, with ‘meticulous attention to detail’, recaptured Dundalk and its military barracks on 14 August, freeing the remaining republican prisoners and imprisoning the 400-strong Free State garrison – much the most ‘spectacularly efficient’ operation conducted by the IRA during the civil war (Andrews, *Dublin made me*, 242–3). But Aiken made no attempt to hold Dundalk, and his division played no further significant part in the war. He declined an invitation to join the IRA executive until de Valera formed a republican government in October 1922, and he attended the next, week-long meeting in Co. Waterford in March 1923, when he supported de Valera’s peace resolution (which was defeated by six votes to five). He was present on 10 April at the skirmish on the slopes of the Knockmealdown mountains when Liam Lynch (qv) was fatally wounded, and on 20 April was appointed Lynch’s successor as IRA chief of staff, a post he held until the end of 1925. The mutual respect and understanding between Aiken and de Valera was instrumental in ending the war: the timing of de Valera’s peace proclamation on 27 April was coordinated with Aiken’s simultaneous order to the IRA to suspend all offensive operations and to hide their arms. Although Aiken remained on the run, ‘permitted to wander about Co. Armagh unmolested’ (Garvin et al., 24) until his dramatic reappearance at a commemoration ceremony in Dundalk in April 1925, his private means cushioned him against the worst hardships experienced by other republicans.

Aiken topped the poll as the Sinn Féin abstentionist candidate in the Louth constituency at the general election of August 1923, a seat he held until his retirement from the dáil fifty years later. His admission to the IRA convention in November 1925, that de Valera’s republican ‘government’ was considering entering the dáil, prompted the IRA’s withdrawal of allegiance, which it henceforth vested in its own executive, the army council; it led also to Aiken’s expulsion from the IRA.

Although he was in the US on a republican fund-raising mission when de Valera founded Fianna Fáil in May 1926, he was on the new party's national executive from the outset.

In 1928 Aiken bought a dairy farm at 'Dún Gaoithe', Sandyford, Co. Dublin, where he lived and farmed for the rest of his life; he was also a part-time inventor who took out various patents – for a turf stove, a beehive, an air-shelter, an electric cooker, and a sprung heel for a shoe (Skinner, 178; Horgan, 67–8).

**Public office: defence, lands, and finance** When Fianna Fáil first entered government in March 1932, Aiken's 'almost symbiotic relationship' with de Valera (O'Brien, 217) prompted his nomination as minister for defence. It 'proved an inspired choice . . . his heart was not in the civil war and he . . . was probably more acceptable to the Free State officers than any other possible appointment. He soon reconciled the army to the new régime' (Lee, 176). He also sought to reconcile the IRA, and his first official act was to visit the republican prisoners in Arbour Hill prison on the evening of 9 March; they were released next day. Aiken had other ministerial roles in the 1930s. Acting as minister for agriculture in the absence of James Ryan (qv) at the Ottawa conference in the summer of 1932, he introduced the use of turf in the Curragh camp. In 1933, when he was acting as minister for lands, he launched the general turf development scheme and always remained passionately interested in the development of the bogs; he was also responsible for the 1933 land act which reduced the land annuities and accelerated land redistribution.

Much of Aiken's importance in successive Fianna Fáil governments flowed from his influence on de Valera. John Dulanty (qv), the Irish high commissioner in London, told the British government in 1938 that de Valera 'relies upon him to keep the IRA lot quiet and behind the government' (Fisk, 69). He was the most anglophobic of de Valera's ministers and was omitted from the Irish delegation which negotiated the Anglo–Irish agreements of 25 April 1938; the defence agreement handed over the ports retained by the British under the terms of the 1921 treaty and made possible Irish neutrality throughout the second world war, when Aiken held the post of minister for the coordination of defensive measures. His personal direction of a draconian censorship regime became notorious, and he was frequently accused of dictatorial tendencies – one critic, Senator Theodore Kingsmill Moore (qv), spoke of his turning censorship into 'a Frank-aikenstein monster' (Ó Drisceoil, 260). His defence was epitomised in an unapologetic memorandum to government in January 1940 which denounced 'self-styled democrats who would hold on to the peace-time liberalistic trimmings of democracy while the fundamental basis of democracy was being swept from under their feet by the foreign or domestic enemies of their democratic state' (Fisk, 141). Yet when censorship ended, on 11 May 1945, the shy, gruff minister held a dinner for the newspaper editors who had been his severest critics.

When Malcolm MacDonald, the former British dominions secretary, brought a formal plan for the unification of Ireland if it entered the war on the allied side to Dublin in June 1940, he found that Aiken – more than de Valera or Seán Lemass (qv) – ‘took it upon himself to do most of the talking, and was extremely rigid in his opposition’. Although Aiken was then convinced that Britain would lose the war, John Maffey (qv), the British representative in Ireland, thought him ‘anti-British but certainly not pro-German’ (Fisk, 69, 174, 184, 264–7). His anglophobia was so deep-rooted that as late as 1979 he acknowledged that throughout the war he had regarded Britain as a greater military threat than Germany, an attitude he had made plain during a stormy White House meeting with an infuriated President Roosevelt during his abortive mission seeking American arms, ships, and food in the spring of 1941. It found further expression in 1945 in his support for de Valera's notorious visit to the German legation to offer his condolences when Hitler died, notwithstanding the vehement opposition of the senior officials in the Department of External Affairs.

Aiken's enduring intimacy with de Valera next led to his appointment in June 1945, at his own request, as minister for finance in place of the president-elect, Seán T. O'Kelly (qv). He proved a ‘dogged and inquisitive’ minister who entertained more independent and unorthodox economic ideas than any of his predecessors in the Department of Finance, one of whom, Seán MacEntee (qv), he had earlier antagonised by his support for the introduction of family allowances. The secretary of the department, J. J. McElligott (qv), was so alarmed by Aiken's espousal of the social credit policies propounded in Canada by Maj. C. H. Douglas that he plucked the young T. K. Whitaker from the ranks to act as the new minister's personal adviser on monetary theory (Fanning, *Department of Finance*, 392–3). But the economic problems of a postwar Ireland struggling to emerge from isolation, compounded by fuel shortages and bread rationing during the hard winter of 1946–7, offered little scope for Aiken's idiosyncratic instincts and necessitated his introducing a supplementary budget imposing further taxes in the autumn of 1947, shortly before Fianna Fáil went into opposition after the February 1948 election.

**Foreign policy** In June 1951, when de Valera returned as taoiseach but at last relinquished the foreign policy portfolio he had united with the headship of his successive governments in 1932–48, he chose Aiken to succeed him; the longevity of Aiken's tenure as minister for external affairs (1951–4, 1957–69) has never since been surpassed. Although he was to prefer Lemass as his successor as taoiseach, on foreign policy ‘de Valera's heart beat more with that of Aiken’ (Williams, 144), who identified with the style as much as the substance of de Valera's foreign policy; he rarely sought the advice of cabinet colleagues, and discouraged public discussion of international affairs both in and out of the dáil. That he had been bequeathed de Valera's mantle made his authority impregnable and, despite the new taoiseach's antipathy for his sitting tenant in Iveagh House, Lemass never felt strong enough to evict him, and made him tánaiste after the 1965 election. The antipathy was mutual but suppressed, and the two men avoided locking horns by keeping out of each other's way. Aiken ‘argued that the issues of membership of the EEC and that

of Northern Ireland were “constitutional issues” and not his business’ (Keatinge, 2); he saw his own role ‘as being primarily concerned with the continuation and development of a separate Irish foreign policy at the UN. Lemass increasingly thought in terms of London and Europe’ (Williams, 144). ‘Lemass “regarded Aiken as a fool” and was delighted to see him disappear over the horizon in the direction of the United Nations for three months every year’, according to Brian Lenihan (qv), one of the younger, brasher cabinet ministers who shared that aversion (Horgan, 193). The preferred nomenclature of ‘Northern Ireland’ in the taoiseach’s department under Lemass was another point of difference: Aiken and his officials favoured the traditional and irredentist usage of ‘Six Counties’. But Aiken backed Lemass’s unprecedented summit meetings in 1965 with the Northern Ireland prime minister, Terence O’Neill (qv).

Aiken’s determination to establish a distinctive Irish identity at the United Nations likewise mirrored de Valera’s conduct at the League of Nations in 1932–8. Hence his pursuit between 1957 and 1961 of a non-aligned stance on issues such as nuclear non-proliferation, troop withdrawal from central Europe, the Algerian war, UN peacekeeping, and, most controversially, the representation in the UN of the Peoples’ Republic of China (in place of nationalist China). That such activism often incurred western – especially American – displeasure bothered Aiken not at all and helped ensure that Ireland was perceived as punching above its weight in the general assembly. So, too, did his passionate support for decolonisation in Africa and Asia – he once told the assembly that the Irish ‘know what imperialism is and what resistance to it involves’ (Skelly, 125). Such attitudes made Ireland more acceptable in UN peacekeeping missions than most European states, and paved the way for the initial participation of the Irish defence forces, in the Lebanon (1958) and the Congo (1960). But the entry of a host of African and Asian countries, together with the Irish public’s rapturous fascination with the Kennedy presidency in the US and the Atlanticist predilections of Lemass, curtailed his freedom of manoeuvre. Indeed ‘Ireland’s United Nations policy on Cold War issues during the mid to late 1960s was typically formulated within a United States oriented pro-Western context’ (Kennedy and McMahon, 207, 252); the most striking example was the Vietnam war, on which Aiken was eloquent only in his silence. When the nuclear non-proliferation treaty was signed in Moscow in 1968 his dedication won international recognition in his being invited to be its first signatory; ‘that treaty is Frank Aiken’s monument’, observed Conor Cruise O’Brien, a leading member of the Irish delegation during his early years at the UN (Skelly, 264).

Aiken’s high profile during those years cloaked a deep-seated conservatism. He was opposed to expenditure on new embassies and saw the UN as an alternative mechanism for working with the permanent representatives of the countries where Ireland had no diplomatic missions. And there were echoes of the censorious Aiken of the Emergency in 1967: first, when he refused permission for an RTÉ news crew to go to Vietnam under the auspices of the South Vietnamese government, on the grounds that they could not present an objective report in such circumstances

and because it would jeopardise the government quest for American investment in Ireland; and, second, when he prevented a current affairs crew from going to Nigeria because of fears that if Irish public opinion became too pro-Biafran in the Nigerian civil war it would endanger Irish missionaries elsewhere in Nigeria. He also resisted the burgeoning links between Fianna Fáil and business (especially with the building industry) institutionalised in the 1960s by the establishment of Taca (a fund-raising organisation of 500 businessmen who obtained privileged entrée to ministers in return for contributing to the party coffers) to which he denied access to his Louth constituency (Faulkner, 35). Such concerns came to a head when Lemass suddenly announced his decision to resign as taoiseach in November 1966. A 'very distressed' Aiken, who intensely disliked and distrusted Charles Haughey (1925–2006) – 'hated him like poison', according to Kevin Boland (qv) – wrote to Lemass from the UN and vainly asked him to stay on for another two years to improve the prospects of the succession of George Colley (qv) (Horgan, 333–5). Although Aiken proposed Colley when he unsuccessfully stood against Jack Lynch (qv) at the party meeting on 9 November 1966, he was thereafter supportive of Lynch, who reappointed him as tánaiste and minister for external affairs.

**Northern Ireland** Aiken's restraint and imperturbability was a source of strength for Lynch when the Northern Ireland crisis erupted in 1968–9, and he instructed members of all Irish missions abroad to 'avoid public addresses or radio or television appearances, specifically dealing with partition or the situation in the north' (Kennedy, 323). In April 1969, when he flew to New York to brief the UN secretary general, U Thant, he practised what he preached by rejecting all requests for television interviews, including that from RTÉ's Kevin O'Kelly (qv), who had accompanied him on the flight from Dublin; he also forswore attempting to bring the crisis to the security council. But this benign dominance in cabinet on Northern Ireland policy came to an end after the election in June 1969, when Lynch effectively sacked a surprised Aiken from the government and replaced him on 2 July as minister for external affairs by the similarly surprised but younger and more European-minded Patrick Hillery. 'In losing Aiken, the Lynch government lost a senior player and the main advocate of common sense and moderation in its Northern Ireland policy . . . [and] the aggressive Northern Ireland policy advocated by Neil Blaney had no opponent' (Kennedy, 328). Yet when Lynch first learnt of the plot to import arms in April 1970 he turned to Aiken for advice. The response was unequivocal: 'you are the leader of the Irish people – not just the Fianna Fáil party. The Irish people come first, the party second and individuals third. If you are asking me what I would do, the whip would be off these men as from now.' His mistrust of Haughey remained so intense that he told Lynch that he would not stand in the 1973 election if Haughey was ratified as a Fianna Fáil candidate and would announce his reasons to the press, suggesting that the party instead approach John Hume or Austin Currie to run in Louth on an independent ticket. It was only after Lynch mobilised pressure from de Valera, Seán MacEntee, George Colley, and Paddy Smith (qv) that Aiken agreed on 12 February to dissimulate and to say that he was retiring from politics on doctor's orders – a decision announced by Lynch next day

at a meeting in Dundalk Town Hall to mark Aiken's seventy-fifth birthday. Further outraged and bemused by Lynch's bringing Haughey back to the opposition front-bench in January 1975, in the last ten years of his life Aiken never attended an ard fheis nor any other party event (Collins, 75, 95–8). He died 18 May 1983 in St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin.

Aiken married (3 October 1934) Maud Davin (Maud Aiken (qv)), director of the Dublin Municipal School of Music and daughter of Alderman John Davin, hotel proprietor, and his wife, Mary (née O'Gara); the couple were received in private audience by Pope Pius XI on their honeymoon and later had a daughter and two sons, Aedamar (1938), Proinnsias (1941), and Lochlann (1942).

The best assessment of Frank Aiken, who has yet to find the biographer he deserves, is by Todd Andrews (*Man of no property*, 123–4): 'He was a brave soldier and a competent one. No man had felt so deeply about the "split" on the treaty and no man tried harder to prevent the civil war. He had unlimited patience and unusual capacity for detail. He was indifferent to the opinions of either his political friends or opponents or indeed of anyone except de Valera. He could not be insulted because he was never aware of an insult being offered. He was not sensitive to the feelings of others. Nor could he be intimidated . . . Aiken was a man of ingenuity and imagination. He was the last of the Sinn Féiners.'

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